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## Kentucky Proud

State ag department program focusing on local goods takes off

 By Jenna Mink, *The Daily News*, [jmink@bgdailynews.com](mailto:jmink@bgdailynews.com)  
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It's a muggy Thursday afternoon, and while many shoppers escape the heat inside an air-conditioned grocery store, Merinda Young balances her bag of tomatoes and box of peaches outside at Jackson's Orchard and Nursery.

"They taste better," said Young, of Bowling Green. "The taste is number one, and price-wise you pay a lot more if you go to a grocery store."

In fact, the summer season finds many shoppers foregoing trips to stores and flocking to orchards, roadside produce stands and farmers markets. And more local retailers and producers are signing up with Kentucky Proud - a statewide program that promotes buying and selling local foods.

Kentucky Proud helps form relationships between local producers and sellers and gives Kentucky Proud retailers a hand with advertising and other promotions. Producers and retailers can sign up on the agriculture department's Web site.

"It's huge," said Bill Clary, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's director of public relations. "I used to have to chase down people (to sign up). Today, I have five or six people looking for me."

The four-year-old program has grown from 30 to 1,500 members in the past few years. Last year, Kentucky Proud products raked in \$80 million. One of the biggest contributors, local farmers markets, were responsible for \$8 million, and the program looks to add \$12 million to sales with its new partner: Save-A-Lot.

"We're pretty pumped about it," Clary said about the new partnership.

Save-A-Lot recently announced it will join with Kentucky Proud to sell locally grown produce in more than 100 stores in Kentucky. This makes buying local produce easier for shoppers who do not have easy access to farmers markets, Clary said.

Bowling Green houses two Save-A-Lots, one on U.S. 31-W By-Pass and the other on Russellville Road.

"It's catching on," said Mitchell Smith, store manager at the Save-A-Lot on the bypass. "When you buy from individuals in the state, you keep revenue local, opposed to getting tomatoes from Mexico."

The bypass Save-A-Lot already sells Kentucky Proud-sponsored products, such as microwave popcorn, salsa, smoked meat, peppers, tomatoes, milk, cakes and jams.

Smith said he also likes the idea of selling Kentucky produce because it helps local farmers.

"You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours," he said.

Kentucky Proud helps tobacco farmers who are dealing with the ever-changing tobacco industry find other ways to make money. And selling produce is an alternative.

"We don't have a cookie-cutter mentality," Clary said.

Kentucky Proud officials helped a dairy farmer in Barren County develop a new product to stay alive in the slumping economy. They worked with Winchester-based Ale-8-One soft drink company to develop a locally produced product: Ale-8 salsa, which is made from vegetables produced by northern Kentucky farmers.

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Michelle Howell, a Kentucky Proud farmer, joined the program when she and her husband started selling their produce at a Bowling Green farmers market.

"Of course it benefits the farmers," she said. "And you know where you're getting your produce."

Howell recently got involved with the Eat Local Challenge, which asked local residents to make a pledge in July to eat local foods. Some promised to only eat local foods during one meal, but some pledged for the entire month. The Howell's two children, a 4-year-old and a 2-year-old, joined the family in eating local food for a month.

"They really didn't mind," Howell said. "We replaced it with things available at the farmers market."

Even though Snickers and Captain Crunch were out of the question, the Howells bought locally made deserts.

The Howells produce and sell watermelons, cantaloupes and tomatoes, a product that was not affected by the recent salmonella outbreak, if it was locally grown.

"It hurt the overall tomato market, but not Kentucky too badly because (local tomatoes) were not out of the ground yet," Clary said.

It's not just local producers who benefit from Kentucky Proud. A lot of independent grocery stores, which are looking for a niche, find it through Kentucky Proud products.

"They become known as the place who use Kentucky Proud products," Clary said.

It costs less to transport products across the state (or down the road) than to ship nationwide or overseas. The average farm product travels 1,500 miles to its seller.

"It makes more sense to move food less distance," Clary said.

Kentucky Proud foods are available in five Bowling Green stores: Save-A-Lot stores, Nutrition Center, Cambridge Market and Cafe and Chaney's Dairy Barn, a local restaurant that doubles as a small grocery and gift shop.

"When we started the dairy barn in 2003, we wanted to support as many other Kentucky farmers as possible," owner Carl Chaney said.

When customers walk into the barn, they are greeted by a corner full of locally produced foods: popcorn, ham, jams, jellies, sauces, seeds, coffee, bread, cheese and other items.

And the most popular item, ice cream, also features Kentucky Proud products. The peach and strawberry ice cream is made with local fruit.

When they started making the ice cream, the owners used processed strawberries. After they started using local berries, the taste significantly improved, Chaney said.

"There's something that's there, and you can tell that it's not artificial," he said.

For the past few weeks, the Chaney's have hosted tour groups from Kansas, and the travelers want to get their hands on Kentucky Proud products.

"These folks are wanting to buy something from Kentucky," he said. "They're buying the ham; they're buying the jams; they're buying the popcorn."

Consumers tend to be more confident when buying groceries if they know where the produce originated, said Cathy Otis, manager at Jackson's Orchard.

"There's a lot of farmers out there and we're one of them," she said. "(Kentucky Proud) does a lot for us."

Otis and other retailers travel to the Kentucky Proud showcase where they can visit booths and choose what products they want to sell. Jackson's Orchard sells Kentucky Proud items that range from honey to local relish.

Merinda Young makes the trip up the hill to Jackson's Orchard at least once a week to buy local produce. Young and her 4-year-old daughter have made a tradition out of buying peach ice cream and picking pumpkins at Jackson's.

"This is just a part of her childhood," she said.

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